



Pick Your Path to Health

Make Time for Yourself

Think for a moment. When was the last time you did something just for you? The holidays have come and gone along with many New Year's resolutions. But was making time for yourself among them?

For better health, set aside at least a couple of hours every week just for you. Ending each day stressed and overly fatigued is not healthy. Stress plays a role in high blood pressure, which plagues the African American community in disproportionate numbers. Doctors also link stress to migraine headaches, colds, heart disease, and many other illnesses. Taking a little bit of time to take care of yourself may be the single most important thing you can do to reduce stress and prevent serious illness.

Whatever their income level, many African American women find that leisure time doesn't come easily, particularly for single mothers who bear most of the responsibilities of family life. Caught up in maintaining a job, caring for children and older parents, pursuing a degree, or keeping a home in order, African American women often consider leisure time a luxury.

"African American women are most likely to be taking care of older relatives in the home...and are less likely to have access to health care," says Amy Allina, Program and Policy Director for the National Women's Health Network. "Stress can be severe in the lives of African American women."

Take care of your body and mind

Taking time for yourself goes beyond the things that you would normally do such as eating a nutritious diet and sleeping well. "We don't want the message to be that this is one more thing that women have to do," emphasizes Allina. This is an opportunity to make small adjustments in your life so you don't feel overwhelmed.

If you are already taking time for yourself, keep doing it until it becomes an integral part of your routine. If you are looking for ways to get started, here are some suggestions:

- Start small. You won't be able to take huge blocks of time for yourself on a regular basis, but even 15 minutes, every other day will be a good habit-forming start.
- Seek connections that soothe your soul. Participate in a women-only retreat once a year-secular or religious-to renew your commitment to your well being.
- Be realistic about what you can accomplish in a day. Plan room for unexpected demands on your time and events you can't control.
- Trade a few hours of childcare with a neighbor every month. If you are married or have a significant other, trade childcare duties with a friend specifically so you can have a leisurely date!
- Ask someone to relieve you at least once a week if you take care of an ill family member.
- Send your children to bed early. They will begin the next day refreshed, and you can use the time to do something other than chores.
- Redistribute responsibilities with your partner if you are the only person caring for the children and tending to household needs.
- If your after work social life seems too hectic, learn to say no; stay home and enjoy a hot bath instead!

And if leading a fast-paced life and taking care of others is what you truly love, just make sure your own needs are still being met. When you choose to do things you enjoy, you'll lead yourself down a path to better health year-round.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.